

Iowa Outdoors
Iowa Department of Natural Resources
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Editor: Mick Klemesrud, 515/281-8653
mick.klemesrud@dnr.iowa.gov

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[Electronic photos available upon request]

**STORM OF THE CENTURY -
ARMISTICE DAY BLIZZARD NOV. 11, 1940**

By Lowell Washburn
Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Imagine this. A powerful fall weather system had just topped the Rocky Mountains and was careening eastward toward the Mississippi river. At the same time, a huge Canadian cold air mass was sliding down from the north, while warm moist air pulled up from the south. Call it a Weather Bomb, Widow Maker, Perfect Storm, whatever. Any way you looked at it, the atmospheric brew spelled trouble for the Heartland.

But no one was looking. The year was 1940. Primitive by contemporary standards, professional weather forecasting was something that most folks put little stock in. In fact, according to the National Weather Service's own data, no one was even in the building at Chicago's Mid-west Weather Headquarters during the late night hours of November 10, 1940.

During the wee hours of the following morning, the systems' combined energy unleashed a storm of unfathomable fury. Barometric pressures plunged to some of the lowest ever recorded, reaching a record 28.92 inches at Charles City. By then, the storm

had already begin to cut its thousand mile wide path of death and destruction. Within 24 hours the system would become the most famous and disastrous blizzard in U.S. history. A storm without equal, it is remembered as the day the winds descended, the heavens rained ducks, and duck hunters died.

For mid-western waterfowl hunters, the fall of 1940 was warm and uneventful. And as the doldrums continued into the second week of November, hunters were becoming impatient. Cocking an eye to the North, they watched and waited. Sooner or later the inevitable cold fronts would arrive and birds would move south. For those willing to stick to their marshes, the annual 'Big Push' would be a sweet dream.

On November 11, 1940 sportsmen got their wish. But the day was not what gunners had anticipated. Instead of realizing their "sweet dream", hundreds of waterfowlers suddenly found themselves plunged into a horrific, Stephen King-grade nightmare. Temperatures plummeted from near 60 degrees to below freezing, and then into the single digits --- all within a matter of hours.

By the time it concluded, the storm had dropped more than two feet of snow, buried vehicles and roadways beneath 20-foot drifts, killed thousands of Iowa cattle, and destroyed incalculable amounts of poultry --- including more than a million Thanksgiving turkeys. All told, the storm claimed 160 human lives. At Winona, Minnesota the city bus barn became a temporary morgue as, one by one, the bodies of frozen duck hunters were retrieved. Since many hunters were from out of town, identification was delayed until bodies thawed and pockets could be searched.

On an island near Harper's Ferry, sixteen-year-old Jack Meggers was one of the hunters who fought for his life that fateful day. A retired Iowa game warden currently living in Mason City, Meggers, now 84, has spent a lifetime on the water. Today, no outdoor event remains more deeply etched in his mind than the morning of Nov. 11, 1940.

"It was Armistice Day [now called Veteran's Day] and we were out of school," Meggers begins. "Me, my Dad, and two brothers headed out to an island at Harper's Ferry. One of the things I remember most is that, just before the storm hit, the sky turned all orange. It's hard to explain, but I remember that it was really strange."

The big winds arrived suddenly recalls Meggers, and with the wind came ducks. Not just a flock here or a flock there, but rather hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands. It was a scene seldom witnessed. A scene that in terms of sheer magnitude, will never be repeated.

"We'd never seen anything like it," says Meggers. "When the ducks arrived, they came in unending waves and they came in all species."

“Those ducks were all flying about this high off the water [his hand indicates around waist high] and they were all doing about 90 miles an hour with that wind,” he continues.

The Meggers party lost no time in taking advantage of the astonishing flight. But although waterfowl continued to pour down in unending supply, connecting with the wind driven birds presented a major challenge, recalls Meggers. The boys concentrated so hard on the task at hand, that none of them seemed to notice [or care?] as the winds began to attain hurricane force.

“All of a sudden, Dad said, ‘Grab the decoys --- We’re getting out of here.’ But we were throwing an awful lot of ammunition into the air, and none of us wanted to quit. The sky was just full of ducks,” says Meggers. “Finally Dad said, ‘Grab the decoys NOW or we’re leaving without them. That’s when we began to see how bad it [the weather] was getting.”

Meggers’ Dad had made the right call. In addition to raging winds and unfathomable legions of ducks, the storm had also begin to deliver pelting rain which quickly turned to sleet, then heavy snow. Visibility dropped to near zero as hunters all up and down the Great River struggled --- many unsuccessfully --- to return to shore.

“It was really rough. By the time we finally made it to the shoreline, you couldn’t even see the shoreline,” Meggers recalls. “By then, the combination of snow and wind was just incredible. Our group made it back. But not everyone did.”

An island away from where the Meggers party hunted, a father and two sons were equally mesmerized by the arriving swarms of waterfowl. Lured into staying beyond the point of no return, their shallow draft duck boat proved no match for the wind and waves. As visibility and daylight faded, the hunters found themselves stranded.

“The oldest son was a college athlete,” Meggers continues. “When things started getting tough [probably the onset of hypothermia] he told his younger brother to jump to stay warm. Every time the younger kid quit jumping, his brother would punch him. The Dad and older brother died on that island. The younger brother just kept on jumping through the night. They rescued him the next day. His legs were frozen hard as wood below both knees and he lost them. He was the sole survivor of his group.”

“That kid was 16, same as me,” says Meggers. “I’ll never forget what happened that day on the river.” A short distance downstream, four more hunters died during the night on an island near Marquette.

For as long as he can remember, Clear Lake’s Max Christensen has been an avid waterfowler. Today, it seems more than a little ironic that Christensen nearly missed out on history’s greatest duck hunt.

“I still remember nearly every detail from that day,” Christensen begins. “I was a high school senior when the November 11 snowstorm arrived in Ventura, Iowa. I lived on a farm and we hadn’t even had a frost yet. The livestock was still in the fields and all the poultry was still outside.”

“I got on the bus at eight o’clock, wearing just a light jacket. The bus driver was Max Millhouse, and I always sat right behind him because he liked to talk about hunting. As we got closer to school every cornfield had little cyclones of feeding ducks. The closer we got to Clear Lake, the more we saw. There were so many ducks that it was almost eerie.”

“By the time we arrived at Ventura, I had already decided to head back home. There were just too many ducks in the air to be in school. Max [the bus driver] suddenly announced we was going with me.”

“When we got back to my house, the storm was coming up fast and my folks were trying to get the chickens inside. We helped, and so instead of being in trouble for skipping school, I was a hero.”

“With that finished, we went to a nearby 30-acre marsh,” said Christensen. “It was already snowing when we got there, and at first we didn’t see anything on the slough. I thought --- ‘Oh No, the ducks left.’ Then we saw something move, and suddenly realized what was happening. That slough was completely covered in ducks – so many that you couldn’t see any water or make out individual birds. We started shooting, and it was something. Every duck on that slough was a mallard. You can’t even imagine what it was like.”

“The storm really picked up and Max announced that he was heading back while he still could. I went to a different marsh closer to home and kept hunting. I don’t think it would have mattered where you went that day, every place was full of ducks. They were everywhere.”

“The snow finally got so bad that I had to take my ducks and walk for home,” said Christensen. “A school bus came down the road, but it couldn’t make it in the snow and had to turn back. Before leaving, it dropped off 17 school kids at our house. They had to spend the night.”

When Christensen entered his farmstead, he was informed that a Garner dentist by the name of Doc Hayes had parked in the yard and then walked to a nearby marsh. Since he hadn’t returned, the hunter was feared lost. Tossing caution to the winds, Christensen immediately launched a daring rescue.

“I knew I had to try and find him,” relates Christensen. “I was young and didn’t think of any danger. I had a good idea of where Doc would have been hunting and started up a fenceline that led from the buildings. I don’t think I could see more than 15 feet in front of me, that’s how bad it was.”

“I found Doc Hayes on that fenceline. He was just standing there, stuck in a drift. He couldn’t move. When I got up to him, he started crying. ‘I thought I was dead,’ he said to me. I took his gun and a big bunch of ducks and we started back. I told him to step in my tracks. I broke the trail, and our tracks would disappear almost instantly.”

“When we got home, my Dad and all those school kids were already in the basement picking my ducks. I don’t know how many mallards were down there, but it was a lot. It was really something. We still had fresh tomatoes from the garden, all those ducks, and snow drifts piling up outside,” said Christensen.

“The next day we shoveled out Doc’s Cadillac which was buried in the yard. When we reached the road, something moved in the snow. I had shoveled out a live coot. That bird had lit on the road and become buried in a drift. The coot was just fine and flew away.”

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[Electronic photo available upon request]

A GOOSE BY ANY OTHER NAME...

By Lowell Washburn

Iowa Department of Natural Resource

With incredible weights attaining 10, 12, and rarely even 15 pounds, its easy to see where Iowa’s homegrown, corn fed giant Canada goose [*Branta canadensis maxima*] gets its name.

But when it comes to determining the proper name of our smallest subspecies of Canada goose, the water becomes more cloudy. Commonly referred to as Hutchins’ goose, Hutchie, cackling goose, squealer, and even brant --- no other bird name is surrounded by more confusion.

Weighing roughly the same as a drake mallard [some mallards are actually heavier], Hutchins’ Canada geese are best known for small size, stubby bills, and high pitched call. Enduring the longest migration of any North American goose, Hutchins’ Canadas nest on the remote tundras of arctic Canada. In fall, they migrate southward through prairie Canada, the Dakotas, and Iowa. Primary wintering areas are found along the sunny coastal marshes of Texas and Mexico.

In spite of its scientific name --- *Branta canadensis hutchinsi* --- many hunters are surprised to learn that the familiar Hutchins’ goose isn’t really a “Hutch” at all, but is properly referred to as the Richardson’s Canada goose.

Here’s how the confusion began. According to historic text, the species was first reported by Sir John Richardson from a goose killed north of Hudson Bay in 1822.

Although Richardson named the ‘new’ species after himself, Sir John promptly assigned the bird the scientific name of “*Hutchinsi*” after Thomas Hutchins who was a former naturalist, fur buyer, and accountant for the famous Hudson’s Bay Company. Oddly enough, the scientific name seems to be the only one that stuck, and the species has been incorrectly referred to as a “Hutchie” ever since.

During the 1960s, large numbers of Hutchins’ geese [I still call them that myself] always arrived in Iowa during the third week of September. This migration was followed by mass arrival of snow geese during mid-October. Neither of these arctic nesting species appeared to have encountered much in the way of hunting pressure before arriving here and were easy pickings for Iowa hunters.

Tame and trusting, flocks of Hutchins’ geese would eagerly respond to the most inept calling [You should have heard us] and minimal spreads of crude decoys.

But times have changed. Although legions of Hutchins’ Canada geese still arrive in Iowa each autumn, they are now among the most wary of all wildfowl. Contemporary Hutchins’ can tell decoys from the real thing from a mile away, and putting one in the roaster usually requires abnormal weather conditions such as driving sleet, snow, or better yet, fog. But whether the noisy flocks make it all the way into the decoys or not, just the opportunity to thrill to the sight and sound of these tiny arctic travelers makes the outdoor adventure well worth the effort.

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DEER HUNTING Q&A: SPIKE BUCK REPORTING ON ANTLERLESS LICENSES; WORN OR UNREADABLE TAGS; WHERE DO I ATTACH THAT TAG??

Each fall many hunters find themselves dealing with situations which are unfamiliar and concerns arise as to how to handle them. Often hunters ask is it okay to tag a spike buck with an antlerless-only tag and how such an animal should be reported.

First of all, any buck that does not have a forked antler is considered to be an antlerless deer by definition and it is perfectly legal to tag it with an antlerless-only tag. When reporting the deer the hunter will be given the choice of designating it as a doe, button buck, shed-antlered buck, or antlered buck. Obviously, a spike buck is not a doe or a shed-antlered buck, and a button buck either has hair-covered bumps about the diameter of a dime or nickel on its head or hair-covered bumps with a 1/4-3/4 inch of exposed bone that forms a small point on top of the bump (this bump is the developing pedicel from which future antlers will grow). So the only category that fits a spike buck is “**antlered buck**” and that is how these animals should be designated when reported regardless of the type of tag they have on them.

A worn or unreadable tag and how to deal with it is a fairly common question from hunters and also one that is fairly easy to correct. If you discover that your tags are

no longer legible before you are out in the field you can take them along with your license to an ELSI dealer and have duplicate tags issued to replace the illegible ones.

Tags can be kept in good condition if they are kept in a license holder or zip top bag and carried in a day pack or some other place where they are not regularly exposed to moisture or sweat. Tags that have resided in your wallet through the summer or early fall can easily become worn.

If you discover you have a worn Transportation tag while in the process of tagging your deer, or if the tag becomes unreadable while on the deer, it can still be dealt with and the deer reported as required. The information needed to report your deer is also on the Harvest Report tag, if it is unreadable too, the 9-digit registration number for the tags is on the Deer Hunting license that was provided along with the tags (the license is less likely to become worn). The registration number should then be written on the tag(s). With the registration number, the hunter can then report the deer in a normal fashion and place the Harvest Report tag on the animal along with the Confirmation Number to complete the reporting process.

A tagging requirement that is new for 2008 requires a hunter who kills an antlered buck (by definition, a buck with a forked antler) to place the Transportation Tag on the animal's antler. It is recommended that the tag be placed on the antler beam either at the base or between two points. This new law was passed by the Legislature during their last session.

Hunters who take their deer to a processor or taxidermist have questioned how they are supposed to transport the deer carcass if the tags are on the antlers and the head has been removed from the animal in preparation for transport to the processor or has been retained by a taxidermist. In this situation the hunter would place the Transportation Tag on the animal's antlers and the Harvest Report tag on the leg of the deer (or carcass).

All deer taken must be reported using the harvest reporting system by midnight the day after the deer is recovered or before taking it to a locker, taxidermist, processing it for consumption, or transporting it out-of-state; whichever comes first.

This is the third year where hunters have reported their kill and it is a very important part of the deer management program in Iowa, playing a vital role in managing deer populations and providing hunting opportunities. Hunters can report their deer on the DNR website (www.iowadnr.gov), by calling the toll free reporting number (1-800-771-4692), or also at a license vender. For hunters with internet access, the online reporting of the harvest is a quick and easy way to register your deer.

Hunt safely and enjoy your time in the woods this fall.

For more information, contact Tom Litchfield, state deer biologist at (641) 774-2958

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IOWA OUTDOORS MAGAZINE 13-MONTH CALENDAR NOW AVAILABLE

DES MOINES—Stay abreast of appointments, celebrations and unique Iowa experiences with the DNR's glossy 13-month Iowa Outdoors Magazine calendar (December 2008 through December 2009).

Packed with stunning nature photography, historical and natural event happenings such as bloom times, migrations, hunting and fishing seasons, lunar cycles and other events listed throughout the year, you'll never be in the dark on what's happening in Iowa's outdoors.

The large format calendar opens to 18 ½ by 12 inches wide, and features the largest date boxes ever for easy writing of appointments and notes.

The calendar makes an inexpensive gift to landowners, friends and family and a great stocking stuffer. The \$3.50 price includes shipping and handling. Order online at www.iowanaturestore.com, or call 515-281-5918. Credit cards accepted.

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AMES WATER TRAILS AND LOW HEAD DAM LISTENING SESSION CHANGED TO DEC. 4

An 18-month planning process is underway for water trails and low-head dam safety in Iowa. The Ames date originally scheduled for November 6 has been rescheduled for December 4. The input from these listening sessions will influence Iowa Department of Natural Resources' priorities and plans in coming years.

"Water trails have become a key new way for Iowans to connect with their rivers and lakes," said Nate Hoogeveen, river programs coordinator for the Iowa DNR. "Canoeists and kayakers are using water trails to learn about wildlife they can watch, plan adventures, locate water-access campsites, and learn about the character of streams before they go out."

At the same time, the number of dam-related deaths spiked to six in 2006, some of those on water trails actively being developed.

"It's important that dams are part of the conversation, as most Iowans are not familiar with the dangers of these structures," said Hoogeveen. "Outreach, education, and physically changing the way these dams are constructed needs to be part of the overall plan as we go forward."

Iowa State University's College of Design was awarded a \$110,000 contract from the Iowa DNR in October to lead development of the plan.

"We very much want to hear from Iowans on what experiences they want from their rivers and lakes," said Mimi Wagner, a professor in ISU's Department of Landscape Architecture. "A number of things can affect their experience on these public resources, such as the accesses they use, the information available, and long-term maintenance of water-related

facilities. We welcome and need input in developing priorities for limited funding that make sense for Iowans.”

ISU and the Iowa DNR kicked off its Statewide Water Trails and Low-head Dam Safety Plan along the Raccoon River in Adel with more than 100 people in attendance on September 29. This planning process will provide the framework for development of water trails going forward, and a how-to manual for volunteers and public lands managers developing water trails.

The upcoming listening sessions are the public’s first opportunity to give input, and will serve as the foundation for more in-depth exploration of how draft elements of the plan are developed.

The following five regional sessions are scheduled: Johnson County - 7 p.m., Nov. 13, Kent Park, Conservation Education Center, 2048 Hwy. 6 NW, Oxford; Pottawattamie County - 7 p.m., Nov. 18, Botna Bend Park Shelter, Hancock; Cherokee County – 7 p.m., Nov. 20, Cherokee County Conservation Center, 629 River Road, Cherokee; Buchanan County – 7 p.m., Dec. 1, Fontana Park Nature Center 1883 125th St., Hazleton. Story County - 7 p.m., Dec 4, McFarland Park, 56461 180th St., Ames;

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VOLUNTEER FIRE ASSISTANCE GRANTS AWARDED TO RURAL FIRE DEPARTMENTS

AMES – The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Forestry Bureau, in cooperation with US Forest Service - State and Private Forestry, has awarded grants to 100 rural Iowa fire departments to aid their efforts in battling wildfires. The grants offer valuable funding assistance for wildfire suppression equipment, personal protective equipment, and communications equipment.

Gail Kantak, fire supervisor with the DNR’s Forestry Bureau, said the following fire departments have received notification that their 2008 Volunteer Fire Assistance grant request has been approved:

Algona Fire Dept, Amana Fire Dept, Anamosa Fire Dept, Andrew Fire Dept, Anita Fire Dept, Arnolds Park Fire Dept, Ashton Fire Dept, Atkins Fire and First Responders, Batavia Fire Dept, Bellevue Fire Dept, Birmingham Fire Dept, Brighton Fire Dept, Calmar Fire Dept, Camanche Fire Dept, Castalia Fire Dept, Chester Fire Dept, Colwell Community Vol Fire Dept, Cresco Community Fire Dept, Creston Fire Dept, Dayton Fire Dept, Decorah Fire Dept, Defiance Fire Dept, Delmar Fire Dept, Denver Fire Dept and Dysart Fire Dept.

Also, Elberon Fire Dept, Fayette Fire Dept, Ferguson Fire Dept, Floyd Community Vol Fire Dept, Garwin Fire Dept, Glenwood Fire Dept, Grand Mound Fire Dept, Grand River Fire Dept, Griswold Fire Dept, Guttenberg Fire Dept, Hamburg Fire Dept, Harpers Ferry Fire Dept, Hawarden Fire Dept, Hawkeye Community Fire Dept, Hopkinton Fire Dept, Humeston Fire Dept, Jamaica Fire Dept and Jefferson Fire Dept.

Also Kalona Fire Dept, Kamrar Fire Dept, Keota Fire Dept, Key West Fire Dept, Lamotte Fire Dept, Lansing Fire Dept, Lehigh Fire Dept, Little Sioux Fire Dept, Lost

Nation Fire Dept, Lucas Fire Dept, Marcus Fire Dept, Martelle Fire Dept, Milford Fire Dept, Millersburg Fire Dept, Mondamin Fire Dept, Moorhead Fire Dept, Nashua Fire Dept, New Hampton Fire Dept, North Keokuk Co Fire Dept, North Liberty Fire Dept, Northern Warren Fire Dept, Onawa Fire Dept, Orange City Fire Dept, Oxford Fire Dept and Oyens Fire Dept.

Also Parkersburg Fire Dept, Percival Fire Dept, Pleasantville Emergency Services, Pulaski Fire Dept, Quimby Fire Dept, Radcliffe Fire Dept, Riverside Fire Dept, Ryan Fire Dept, Scarville Fire Dept, Schleswig Fire Dept, Shell Rock Fire Dept, Sidney Fire Dept, Sioux Center Fire Dept, Solon Fire Dept, Spirit Lake Fire Dept, Stanley Fire Dept, Stanton Fire Dept, Stout Fire Dept, Stuart Fire Dept and Sumner Fire Dept.

Also Tipton Fire Dept, Toledo Fire Dept, Tripoli Fire Dept, Ute Fire Dept, Ventura Fire Dept, Volga Community Fire Dept, Wallingford Fire Dept, Wapello Co Rural Fire Dept, Washta Fire Dept, West Union Community Fire Service, Inc., Woodward Fire Dept and Wyoming Fire Dept.

Kantak reminds all fire departments of the importance of submitting Wildland Fire Reports whenever they respond to a wildland fire or provide assistance to a prescribed or controlled wildland fire. Wildland Fire reporting forms are available at www.iowadnr.com/forestry/fire.html. Departments actively returning these reports receive priority points for the Volunteer Fire Assistance grant applications. These wildland fire reports are compiled locally and nationally and are reported to Congress.

For more information, contact Kantak at 515-233-1161.

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VOLUNTEERS OFFERED OPPORTUNITIES TO GIVE THANKS

DES MOINES —With the month of Thanksgiving here, Keepers of the Land, the volunteer program with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR), offers many statewide opportunities for volunteers to give thanks for our natural resources.

- **Gun Range Event:** Officials at the Princeton Gun Range, near Princeton, are seeking volunteers to assist with the construction of target stands and signs, repair of shooting tables, and removal of empty shell casings and cartridges. This event will take place on November 7 from 2 – 4 p.m. For more information, contact Jeff Harrison at 563-349-9418.
- **Trail Improvement Event:** Officials at Pleasant Creek State Recreation Area, near Palo, are seeking volunteers to relocate a hitching rail and bench along one of the park recreational trails. The event will take place on November 13 from 9 a.m. – 1 p.m. Volunteers should dress for outdoor work. Tools and on-site training will be provided. For more information contact Patrick Thomas at 319-436-7716.
- **Trail Sign Design Opportunity:** Officials at Green Valley State Park, near Creston, are seeking volunteers to assist with the design and placement of educational signs for

their park trail system in order to allow park visitors to enjoy self-guided interpretive hikes. Designed signs will be built by park staff. This opportunity is available immediately and is ongoing. For more information contact Greg Haley at 641-782-5131.

- **Park Construction Opportunity:** Officials at Wildcat Den State Park, near Muscatine, are seeking volunteers to assist with various construction projects including roofing and siding buildings; scraping and painting bridges; doing masonry work on steam engine boiler in park's historic grist mill; constructing an information kiosk; and building new entrance portals to the park. Volunteers are also needed to serve as project leaders. This opportunity is available immediately and is ongoing. For more information contact Jim Ohl at 563-263-4337.
- **Sorting, Updating, and Organizing Project Opportunities:** Officials at the Wallace State Office Building, in Des Moines, are seeking volunteers to assist with various projects that require filing, sorting, updating, and organizing. On-site training will be provided. This opportunity is available immediately and is ongoing. For more information contact Merry Rankin at 515-281-0878.

Find more information about volunteer opportunities and events at www.keepersoftheland.org.

For more information, contact Merry Rankin at (515) 281-0878 or at Merry.Rankin@dnr.state.ia.us.

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